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**MCCLELLAN AND GRANT: THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL TRUST FOR  
EFFECTIVE COMMAND AT THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL OF WAR**

**By**

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

**Signature:**\_\_\_\_\_

**9 February 2004**

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This research papers analyzes the role of personal trust in command relationships between the operational commander and their superiors. In order to analyze their effectiveness the author uses Dr. Milan Vego's traits of an operational leader as the standard. The paper will focus on the operations of Major General George B. McClelland and Major General Ulysses S. Grant. This paper will examine the relationship between President Abraham Lincoln and Major General George B. McClellan (USA) during the Peninsula and Maryland Campaigns as an example of the failure to maintain personal trust between the operational commander and their superiors. In addition, the paper will look at the relationship between Major General Ulysses S. Grant during his campaigns in the West and the establishment and maintenance of personal trust in his relationship with President Abraham Lincoln as an example of personal trust. The paper will then show the relevancy of personal trust to the operational commanders today.

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## **MCCLELLAN AND GRANT: THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL TRUST FOR EFFECTIVE COMMAND AT THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL OF WAR**

Milan Vego argues that “high intellect, strong personality, courage, boldness, and will to act, combined with extensive professional knowledge and experience” are all required traits for effective operational commanders.<sup>1</sup> When operational commanders fail to exhibit these traits, superiors and subordinates will lose personal trust in their leadership, and the command will fail to operate effectively.

This paper considers two operational commanders and their relationships with President Abraham Lincoln. Major Generals George B. McClellan and Ulysses S. Grant had much in common. Both graduated the U.S. Military Academy, served with distinction in combat during the Mexican War, and resigned from the Army to work as civilians in the 1850's. When the Civil War began, both volunteered to fight for the Union.

Yet major differences exist between these two men as commanders. McClellan brilliantly organized, trained, and equipped the Army of the Potomac but consistently failed to exhibit the critical traits of courage, boldness, and will to act. Worse, he refused to subordinate himself to his superiors, most notably the President. He refused an audience with Lincoln, disregarded his direct orders, and even belittled him publicly. His languid approach to battles cost the Union several victories where its advantage over the opposing Confederate force was at least two to one. Consequently, McClellan lost the personal trust of the Commander-in-Chief and was removed from command.

Conversely, Grant successfully and consistently exhibited the traits of a successful operational leader. Grant's troops and superiors quickly recognized his ability to diagnose military conditions and develop strategic solutions backed up by dogged, vigorous determination

to win despite obstacles. Grant ensured that his strategies dovetailed with those of his superiors. Communications between him and others in command were regular and extensive. This trust-building led to a genuine rapport with contemporaries and superiors, most notably President Lincoln, and eventuated in a kind of carte blanche approval of all his operations. Thus, Grant fulfilled his obligation to subordinate himself to national authorities, organize, fight, and win the Nation's battles; his relationship with the Commander in Chief was one of reciprocal trust; he was ultimately selected to serve as the General-in-Chief of the Union Army; and he defeated General Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia.

### **Lincoln: the War President and Commander-in-Chief**

President Lincoln played a greater role in the day-to-day operations of his nation's military strategy during the Civil War than his predecessors in the office.. To understand his involvement one must realize that the very first document he saw as President advised him that Fort Sumter was under attack and that unless re-supplied, Union forces could only hold out for a few more weeks.<sup>2</sup> From that moment, Lincoln was a "war president" and spent more of his time focused on the conduct of the war than any other activity. According to McPherson, Lincoln became a student of military strategy, reading strategy books and learning all he could from General of the Army Winfield Scott and General Henry Wager Halleck, a former West Point Professor, author, and translator of Jomini's *Elements of Military Art and Science*.<sup>3</sup>

During major battles, Lincoln often "lived" at the telegraph office reading military dispatches from his operational commanders. The telegraph enabled expeditious communication like never before; it allowed Lincoln to articulate objectives and directions to his commanders as well as query them for information on their battles and campaigns in near "real time." During

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<sup>1</sup> Milan Vego, *Operational Warfare*, (Newport: Naval War College Press, 2000), 571.

<sup>2</sup> McPherson, James M., *Lincoln the War President: The Gettysburg Lectures*, ed. Gabor S. Boritt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 32.

Confederate General Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson’s Shenandoah Valley Campaign, Lincoln stayed at the War Department telegraph room “around the clock for more than a week and fired off a total of fifty telegrams to half a dozen generals to coordinate an attempt to trap and crush the rebel army.”<sup>4</sup> This reality changed the nature of wartime communications between national-level leaders and necessitated operational commanders respond to near “real time” directions and provide feedback.

Although Lincoln had little military training, he was a natural strategist and understood that the Union strategy must be destruction of the Confederate Armies, blockade of southern ports, and control of the Mississippi River. Lincoln’s greatest military challenge was not to ascertain the correct strategy, but to find an operational commander who could make an army and defeat the Confederacy. His first choice was not an effective one.

### **McClellan and Lincoln: The Loss of Personal Trust**

**The Army is very seldom beaten---it is usually the general who is beaten. Napoleon<sup>6</sup>**

The Union began the war with the personnel and the resources, but no general to lead them. The most senior officer was General Winfield Scott, a general since 1814, seventy-five years old, and too heavy to mount a horse or lead troops in the field.<sup>7</sup> When Lincoln took office in January 1861, the belligerent centers of power and the two primary armies were no more than one hundred miles apart; Lincoln needed an operational commander, and quickly. During July 1861, Brigadier General Irvin McDowell, a politically-appointed commander with few gifts, engaged his ill-prepared force with the Confederate army at Manassas, Virginia, and was

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<sup>3</sup> Williams, T. Harry, *Lincoln and His Generals*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 138-139.

<sup>4</sup> *Lincoln the War President*, 33.

<sup>5</sup> *Lincoln the War President*, 32-33.

<sup>6</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, III, *Ulysses S. Grant; Warrior and Statesman* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1969), 270.

defeated by Confederate forces led by Generals P.G.T. Beauregard and Joseph E. Johnston. This battle was a Confederate tactical victory and a psychological shock to the North. With a victorious Confederate army within twenty-five miles of the U.S. Capitol, and inexperienced Union troops streaming back to the Capitol disorganized and disheartened, Lincoln fired McDowell and replaced him with a new, relatively unknown commander who had won some small victories in what is now West Virginia and arrived with a stellar professional resume. The commander was Major General George B. McClellan.<sup>8</sup> Lincoln expected McClellan to engage the Confederate enemy and remove the threat to the Capitol.

### **High Intellect, Strong Personality, Professional Knowledge, and Experience**

General McClellan was extremely intelligent, had a magnetic personality, and possessed, in comparison to his peers, diverse as well as extensive professional knowledge and experience. According to McPherson, life seemed to have prepared McClellan for greatness. He was from a wealthy Philadelphia family. He attended private schools and received a waiver to attend the U.S. Military Academy at age sixteen, two years under the minimum age. He graduated second in his class and immediately served in the Mexican War, winning renown for his engineering achievements.<sup>9</sup> McClellan caught the eye of Secretary of War Jefferson Davis and became his blicly. <sup>??</sup>His languid approach to battles cost the Nation Utudy the organization and methods of continental armies.<sup>11</sup> Two years later, he resigned his commission to serve as chief engineer for the Illinois Central Railroad, where he excelled as a leader and manager and quickly rose to

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<sup>7</sup> Oscar and Lilian Handlin, *Abraham Lincoln and the Union*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1980), 146.

<sup>8</sup> James M. McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire, the Civil War and Reconstruction*, Second Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc, 1992), 209-212.

<sup>9</sup> James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 359.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen W. Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign*, (New York: Tinker and Fields, 1992), 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Lincoln and His Generals*, 25.



become president of the Eastern Division of the Ohio and Mississippi Railroad.<sup>12</sup> When the war began, McClellan offered his services to the Union and assumed command of the Department of the Ohio. He had a large area to defend and a small army to do it with, but he devised a plan and “won several small but tidy victories.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, he secured the strategically important region for the Union and, subsequently, for himself, command of the Army of the Potomac.<sup>14</sup>

Upon this appointment on 25 Jul 1861, McClellan refused to engage the enemy until he was confident his army was ready to fight. For McClellan, training and organizing the Army of the Potomac eclipsed any call to battle.<sup>15</sup> In this preparation role, he was unrivalled. He took a military force that was disorganized, defeated, and poorly trained and turned it into a well-drilled, trained, organized, equipped, and capable professional fighting force that could challenge any army. His ego expanded along with the influence of his position. He wrote to his wife, “The people call upon me to save the country — I must save it and cannot respect anything that is in the way.”<sup>16</sup>

As McClellan’s influence expanded, so did his arrogance and insubordination to the President and War Department officials. McClellan had failed to communicate to his superiors his plans to engage the Confederate Army. So one late summer evening in 1861, the President, Secretary of State William H. Seward, and Lincoln’s Secretary John Hay, went to see McClellan at his home to learn of his intentions, only to be told that the general was out at a wedding party. They decided to wait for McClellan’s return. When McClellan came home and heard that the President, Seward, and Hay were waiting in the parlor, he went upstairs to bed.<sup>17</sup> Lincoln’s

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen W. Sears, *The Landscape Turned Red: The Battle of Antietam*, (New York: Popular Library, 1983), 20.

<sup>14</sup> *Lincoln and His Generals*, 25-26.

<sup>15</sup> *Ordeal of the Union*, 213.

<sup>16</sup> *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 360.

<sup>17</sup> *Lincoln and His Generals*, 45.

private secretary was enraged by McClellan's disrespect but Lincoln responded, "I will hold McClellan's horse if he will just only bring us success."<sup>18</sup>

McClellan's organizational efforts continued while his troops stood still. His next target was the command structure of the Union Army. He convinced Lincoln that General Scott should be retired and that he himself should hold a dual position as Commander of the Army of the Potomac and Commander-in-Chief, United States Army. It became so 5 November 1861.<sup>19</sup> McClellan did an outstanding job delineating command areas of responsibility and providing logistics and training. Yet he failed to realize the need to develop a command staff to aid him in planning and directing the operations across the different theaters of the war. He mistakenly believed he could manage all the activity himself. Within one month of taking command he wore himself out and contracted typhoid fever.<sup>20</sup> Without the critical support and operational experience a command staff could provide, McClellan failed as an operational commander because he lacked the courage, boldness, and will to act.

Over four months had now passed since Lincoln, in high hopes, had selected this man to defeat the Confederate forces. The United States' principal army was now better organized, trained, equipped, and capable; but their commander failed to lead them in combat against the Confederacy's own principal Army in Virginia. Due to McClellan's inaction, Lincoln began to doubt his ability to handle responsibility as an operational commander, and rightly so.

### **Courage, Boldness, and Will to Act**

McClellan's vice ... was always waiting to have everything just as he wanted before he could attack, and before he could get things arranged as he wanted them, the enemy pounced on him. George Meade, Union General<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 365.

<sup>19</sup> *Ordeal of the Union*, 214.

<sup>20</sup> *Lincoln and His Generals*, 53.

<sup>21</sup> Edward L. Ayers, Ed., *A House Divided: A Century of Great Civil War Quotations* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997), 69.

In his dual role as Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Army and Commander of the Army of the Potomac, McClellan had exhibited a high intellect, strong personality, extensive professional knowledge, and experience. Why did he fail? According to McPherson, McClellan lacked “the mental and moral courage required of great generals.”<sup>22</sup> McPherson also noted “McClellan’s defect was perfectionism. He was superb at preparation . . . The Army was *perpetually almost ready to move*.”<sup>23</sup> With all of his preparation, bravado, and bluster, the closer McClellan came to a campaign, the greater the obstacles he saw ahead. When the Confederate Army was in Manassas, Virginia, in July 1861, McClellan was convinced that Johnston’s army possessed over 100,000 men; in fact they only numbered 50,000. By 11 March 1862, McClellan still had not attacked Confederate forces, and Lincoln had lost trust in McClellan’s ability to handle administrative responsibilities as Commander-in-Chief of the United States Army concurrently with battlefield initiative. Consequently, he appointed General Henry W. Halleck Commander-in-Chief of the United States Army.

Lincoln’s hopes that McClellan would now focus his energies on battlefield action were unfounded. Even with reduced responsibilities, McClellan delayed action against Confederate forces. During his five-month delay on the peninsula, McClellan wrote his wife telling her that he was in a terrible place. “The enemy has three or four times my force; the President . . . will not see the true state of affairs . . . I am thwarted and deceived . . . at every turn.”<sup>24</sup> In reality, McClellan’s forces outnumbered the enemy’s two to one. Although he would eventually engage the enemy in May 1862, his delay cost the Union an earlier victory and the confidence it could have restored in the Nation and in McClellan’s operational leadership.

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<sup>22</sup> *Ordeal by Fire*, 215.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 365.

If he had a million men he would swear the enemy had two million,  
and then he would sit down in the mud and yell for three. Edward M. Stanton, Secretary of War<sup>25</sup>

In both cases, McClellan delayed action to build his forces to numerical advantage.<sup>26</sup> By the time he decided to attack Confederate forces at Manassas, they had abandoned their positions. On the peninsula, while McClellan once again delayed, Lincoln wrote to him 6 April 1862:

And once more let me tell you that it is indispensable to you that you strike a blow. I am powerless to help this...The country will not fail to note—is noting now—that the present hesitation to move upon an intrenched enemy is but the story of Manassas repeated. I beg to assure you that I have never written you or spoken to you in greater kindness of feeling than now, nor with a fuller purpose to sustain you, so far as in my most anxious judgment, I consistently can. But you must act.<sup>27</sup>

Once again, Lincoln's trust in McClellan was in question. Instead of reassuring Lincoln by communicating his plans, McClellan reacted by writing to his wife two days later that if Lincoln wanted the Confederate lines broken "he had better come and do it himself."<sup>28</sup> Nearly two months later, on 31 May 1862, McClellan finally attacked and won at the Battle of Fair Oaks (Seven Pines), although with high casualties. This unnerved McClellan and destroyed what little courage and boldness he possessed as a commander. After the battle McClellan wrote to his wife, "Every poor fellow that is killed or wounded almost haunts me."<sup>29</sup>

The public was not patient with McClellan when newspapers reported that delays due to insufficient forces were a misnomer and that the Confederate forces McClellan avoided were actually far smaller than the Union's. The case against him was building, and Lincoln's faith in his leadership and judgment was nearly gone; McClellan had given Lincoln no reason to trust his command prowess. McClellan had refused to communicate, had delayed answer, or disregarded

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<sup>25</sup> *A House Divided*, 69.

<sup>26</sup> *Ordeal by Fire*, 214-215.

<sup>27</sup> *Lincoln and His General*, 83-84.

<sup>28</sup> *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 426.

<sup>29</sup> *Lincoln and His Generals*, 106.

action to every query from the President for him to use his Army to accomplish anything beyond parades or the appearance of organization. Lincoln's trust was nearly gone.

When General Lee moved his army into Northern Virginia, Lincoln sidelined McClellan and transferred the bulk of his troops to support Union General John Pope's forces facing Lee. Even as a supporting commander, McClellan delayed transferring forces to aid Pope.<sup>30</sup> With the defeat of Pope at the Second Battle of Bull Run, on 28-29 August 1862, Lincoln opted to give McClellan one last chance to prove himself as an operational commander. McClellan quickly reorganized, supplied, equipped, and trained 35 new regiments of soldiers to refit his depleted divisions. With this challenge accomplished, he headed north with the mission from Lincoln to intercept and defeat Lee's Army of Northern Virginia.<sup>32</sup>

On 13 September 1862, McClellan's odds of success significantly improved with the discovery of Lee's battle plan, Special Order # 191. Confederates had left behind the orders wrapped around three cigars in a deserted camp.<sup>33</sup> Here was the advantage McClellan needed to show his abilities without hesitation. He knew the size, dispersion, and objective of Lee's Army. No commander could ask for more. Lee and his Army were outnumbered, exhausted, low on supplies, and were fighting far from their normal area of operations. Even with this edge, McClellan exhibited the same traits as at Manassas, on the Peninsula, and outside Richmond at the Battle of Seven Pines. He delayed sixteen hours to act.<sup>34</sup> This gave Lee time to regroup his forces at Sharpsburg, Maryland, and to fight McClellan's forces to a tactical draw.

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<sup>30</sup> John J. Hennessy, *Return to Bull Run: The Campaign and Battle of Second Manassas*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 468.

<sup>31</sup> *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 545.

<sup>32</sup> *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 545.

<sup>33</sup> *Landscape Turned Red*, 99.

<sup>34</sup> Esposito, Vincent J., Ed., *West Point Atlas of American Wars*, Vol. 1, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc, 1995), 65.

The Battle of Antietam was the bloodiest day in American history. It should have been a tremendous Union victory, but McClellan failed to coordinate his attacks and allowed Lee to move his forces from one point on the battlefield to another. In addition, the day after the battle, McClellan still had 20,000 fresh troops and received 13,000 more. McClellan now had more *fresh* troops than Lee had available to fight. Even so, McClellan did not mount another attack against Lee but instead allowed him to retire from the battlefield and cross the Potomac back into Virginia.<sup>35</sup> McClellan had not complied with Lincoln's direction to "destroy the rebel army." Lincoln, frustrated with McClellan's failure to destroy the Confederate forces, visited him in Maryland and directed him to pursue the rebels while the roads were still good.<sup>36</sup> Halleck described McClellan's lethargy, as ". . . an immobility here that exceeds all that any man can conceive of. It requires the lever of Archimedes to move that inert mass."<sup>37</sup> It would be five weeks before the Union Army moved back into Virginia.<sup>38</sup> Lincoln agreed with Halleck's analysis and even doubted his loyalty; he told his secretary, "I began to fear he [McClellan] was playing false—that he did not want to hurt the enemy . . . If he let them get away I would remove him. He did so & I relieved him [on 7 November 1862]."<sup>39</sup> McClellan's inability to act had destroyed the last remnants of Lincoln's trust in his abilities as an operational leader. McClellan returned to his home in New Jersey to await the Nation's call. It never came.

McClellan possessed a near unrivalled resume and tremendous ability but failed as an operational leader because he lacked the necessary courage, boldness, and will to act. His failure to exhibit these necessary traits and to foster trust between himself and his commander destroyed

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<sup>35</sup> *Lincoln and His Generals*, 70-71; *Ordeal By Fire*, 284-286.

<sup>36</sup> *Ordeal By Fire*, 298-299.

<sup>37</sup> *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 568.

<sup>38</sup> *Ordeal By Fire*, 287.

<sup>39</sup> *The Landscape Turned Red*, 373.

the personal faith of Lincoln and caused the Army of the Potomac to fail. McClellan's removal from command and separation from the United States Army was warranted and necessary.<sup>40</sup>

### **Grant and Lincoln: The Impact of Personal Trust**

Major General Ulysses S. Grant was the near antithesis of McClellan. Grant came from humble beginnings. He was born and raised in rural Ohio where his father was a tanner; he worked as a laborer on small farms and attended small rural schools. Unlike McClellan who graduated second in his class at West Point, Grant graduated 21<sup>st</sup> out of 39 graduates, excelling only at mathematics and jumping horses. Grant then served as regimental quartermaster under General Zachary Taylor in the Mexican War where he received two brevets for bravery at the battles of Molino del Rey and Chapultepec.<sup>41</sup> After the Mexican War, the Army posted Grant to California where he served as a quartermaster. Grant resigned his captaincy, separated from the Army 31 July 1854, and returned to his family.

Grant was a failure as a civilian. When the Civil War began, he was working as a clerk in a leather goods store. Ironically, the man to whom Grant first offered his military services was General George B. McClellan, Commander of the Department of the Ohio. Grant was also refused by the War Department. Congressman Elihu Washburne finally garnered Grant a commission as colonel and the command of the 21<sup>st</sup> Illinois Infantry Regiment.<sup>42</sup>

**High intellect, strong personality, courage, boldness, and will to act, combined with extensive professional knowledge and experience.**

**I have carefully searched the military records of both ancient and modern history, and have never found Grant's superior as a general. I doubt if his superior can be found in all of history. R.E. Lee<sup>43</sup>**

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<sup>40</sup> Vego, *Operational Warfare*, 571.

<sup>41</sup> JFC Fuller, *The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 66-67.

<sup>42</sup> *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 329.

<sup>43</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, III, *Ulysses S. Grant; Warrior and Statesman* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1969), 269-270.

Grant did not appear to possess the level of intellect, strong personality, courage, boldness, and will to act, combined with extensive professional knowledge and experience of a great commander. Yet he did. Grant's military career was a struggle from the beginning. He received neither rapid promotions nor prime assignments. He spent his years on the lines and learned the importance of ensuring that the army had what it needed to fight.<sup>44</sup>

Grant possessed a greater breadth and depth of military experience than McClellan. His early military experiences expanded his intellect, strengthened his personality, and gave greater depth to his professional knowledge, experience, and character. Unlike McClellan, whose meteoric rise to power gave him little to no time to mature as a leader, Grant's journey as an operational leader was slower and incremental. Grant's command experience at each level gave him a "rock solid" foundation of experience to stand on during the war. It also gave him confidence in his abilities and those of the team he developed.

Although Grant's academic achievements at West Point did not equal McClellan's, Fuller disputed the common belief that McClellan's intellectual capabilities were greater than Grant's:

It has been said more than once that General Grant had not the gift of imagination. It is true that he had not the kind of imagination that sees an enemy where none exists; that multiplies by five the numbers of those who happen to be in his front; that discovers obstacles impossible to overcome whenever there is a necessity to act; that sees the road open and the way clear to victory when the foe is far away and not threatening; that conjures up, on his approach, a multitude of impossible movements being made on the flanks and on the rear; that sets the brain of a commander into a whirl of doubt and uncertainty which generally ends in a hasty retreat or ignominious defeat.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Lincoln and His Generals*, 311.

<sup>45</sup> JFC Fuller, *Grant and Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1933), 245.



One of Grant's greatest assets was his capability to see interrelationships, make valid inductions, and identify critical variables in the challenges he faced as an operational commander in the fog and friction of war.<sup>46</sup>

Grant's strategy for the West was in-synch with that of Lincoln. Both understood that the control of the rivers in the West were key to the Union's success. The rivers often served as the only large logistics and travel routes. Grant used this knowledge to select decisive points at Forts Henry and Donelson in the West and achieved strategic results from them by forcing the Confederates to pull out of Kentucky and Tennessee. He followed up his success in Kentucky with victories at Shiloh and then pressured Halleck to allow him to initiate operations to capture the Confederate stronghold at Vicksburg.<sup>47</sup> Grant improved as a commander in each battle. He analyzed his successes and learned from his mistakes.

### **Courage, Boldness, and Will to Act**

**Ulysses don't scare worth a damn.**<sup>48</sup>

Throughout his military career, Grant consistently demonstrated courage, boldness, and will to act as a military leader. As a young soldier in the Mexican War, General Grant was twice awarded battlefield promotions for individual bravery. As a new commander at the Battle of Salt River, he performed admirably despite gripping fear. When remembering his approach to the enemy camp at Salt River, Grant described this fear:

As we approached the brow of the hill from which it was expected to see Harris' camp . . . my heart kept getting higher and higher until it felt to me as though it was in my throat. When we reached a point from which the valley below was in full view I halted . . . the troops were gone . . . It occurred to me . . . Harris had been as much afraid of me as I had been of him . . . I never forgot afterwards. From that moment to the end of the war, I never experienced trepidation upon confronting the enemy.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> *West Point Atlas*, 103.

<sup>48</sup> <http://saints.css.edu/mkelsey/quotes.html>

<sup>49</sup> *The Generalship of U.S. Grant*, 69-70.

In Grant's subsequent battles at Forts Henry and Donelson, and the Battle of Shiloh, the confidence of Grant and his men grew. Grant continued to show courage to overcome tactical setbacks and the ability to rally his frightened command, restore order and confidence for his troops, and defeat his adversary.

During the Vicksburg Campaign, Grant's courage, boldness, and will to act as an operational commander would meet its greatest test. Lincoln had identified Vicksburg as a strategic objective for Grant and his army. The task was daunting. Vicksburg, "The Gibraltar of the West," sat on a 200-foot bluff, making it impregnable to a frontal assault and giving Confederate artillery command of the river. To Vicksburg's west was the Mississippi River and a "maze of swamps, rivers, and jungle like forests."<sup>50</sup> Grant and his Army would struggle from mid-October 1862 to July 1863 to capture this bastion. The only terrain suitable for military operations was to the south and east of Vicksburg. Grant made five separate attempts to take Vicksburg. All but the last failed due to natural obstacles or Confederate resistance.<sup>51</sup>

Grant's ultimate success in capturing Vicksburg was a result of his intellectual ability to envision the plan, strength of personality to persevere despite multiple failures, and boldness and willingness to act as an operational commander despite monumental obstacles. His plan to move his army below Vicksburg and place them on the eastern side of the Mississippi River was controversial due to the danger of Confederate artillery covering the river. Grant accomplished the task even though both General William T. Sherman and Vice Admiral David G. Porter opposed his plan. Grant's courageous leadership and forethought in planning diversionary attacks with Colonel Benjamin Grierson's cavalry and Sherman's feinted attack North of

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<sup>50</sup> *West Point Atlas of American Wars*, 102.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *West Point Atlas of American Wars*, 102.

Vicksburg resulted in the successful movement of his army south of Vicksburg and its unopposed landing on the same side of the river as the Confederate army and fortress.<sup>53</sup>

When this was effected, I felt a degree of relief scarcely ever equaled since. Vicksburg was not yet taken it is true, nor were its defenders demoralized by any of our previous moves . . . But I was on dry ground on the same side of the river with the enemy. All the campaigns, labors, hardships, and exposures from the month of December previous to the time that had been made and endured were for the accomplishment of this one object.<sup>54</sup>

Grant's moral courage during the Vicksburg Campaign was extraordinary. He understood the political necessity to capture Vicksburg. Lincoln needed the military victory, and the opening up of the Mississippi River would have dreadful ramifications for the Confederacy by splitting it in half and cutting off its communications and access to critical resources coming from the West. Lincoln described Grant's victory at Vicksburg as "one of the most brilliant in the world . . . Grant is my man . . . and I am his the rest of the war."<sup>55</sup> The personal trust between these two men had been cemented.

### **Grant's Command Staff**

Throughout the Civil War Grant's responsibilities and campaigns increased in size and complexity. Due to ongoing communications and evaluation, he and his team developed a modern command staff where McClellan had not. During the early years of the war, this staff consisted of himself and his aid-de-camp Captain John A. Rawlins. When Grant took command as the general in chief of the armies of the United States, he had 533,000 troops assigned to 21 separate corps and the independent Army of the Potomac. In Grant's words, they "were like a balky team, no two ever pulling together."<sup>56</sup> Grant reduced the numbers of military departments, and he personally selected and assigned aggressive combat commanders to lead the Union's

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<sup>53</sup> *The Generalship of U.S. Grant*, 189.

<sup>54</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, *Grant Memoirs* (New York: Charles L. Webster & Co., 1994), 224.

<sup>55</sup> *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 638.

armies and defeat the Confederate armies in their departments. Grant then communicated his priorities and concerted military strategy via his now enlarged command staff to field commanders who executed their assignments with a previously unachieved unity of effort.<sup>57</sup> By this point Grant's command staff included general officers and key staff personnel who were experts in the various phases of strategic planning. It also included experienced newspaperman Charles A. Dana. Grant used Dana's communications expertise to effectively communicate his commands requirements and overall objectives to government officials and national authorities.<sup>58</sup> In addition to Dana, many of Grant's staff were experienced general officers who were capable of leading armies themselves. Grant used them to plan, organize, implement, and coordinate operations against the Confederate Armies fighting in every theater of the war.<sup>59</sup> This fact freed Grant to focus on strategic objectives covering both theaters of the war.

Grant's command staff and his willingness to utilize their input were great assets to him as an operational commander and freed him to communicate regularly with Lincoln. This communication added to their personal trust. Where McClellan operated geographically closer to Lincoln than Grant, he was secretive and insubordinate to the President. Lincoln initiated almost every communication between himself and McClellan. Although separated geographically, Grant worked hard to ensure that Lincoln knew his plans and understood how his operational objectives applied to Lincoln's overall strategy. In so doing, Grant developed a strong foundation of personal trust in his relationship with his commander in chief.<sup>60</sup> Lincoln's August 1864 letter to Grant exemplifies the trust in their relationship, "the particulars of your

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<sup>56</sup> *The Generalship of U.S. Grant*, 208-211.

<sup>57</sup> *Ordeal by Fire*, 412.

<sup>58</sup> *Lincoln and His Generals*, 292

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 313-314.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 306.

plans I neither know nor seek to know... I wish not to obtrude any restraints or constraints upon you."<sup>61</sup>

### **Lessons Learned**

What lessons does the study of the operational leadership of McClellan and Grant have for today's commanders? Personal trust in the relationships between the operational commander and superiors is critically important. Also crucial is the selection and continued development of the right leaders for operational command, the impact of changing communications capabilities, and the importance of command staffs.

Commanders must focus on establishing and maintaining a relationship of trust between themselves and their superiors as well as subordinates. A key component is selecting, training, and maturing the right leaders for the right positions. A stellar resume does not always make for an effective operational commander. McClellan lost opportunities to gain critical experience, maturity, and confidence due to rapid promotion to operational command. The military often makes the same mistake today with the below-the-zone promotion system. Many talented officers are promoted years below the zone, negatively impacting the breadth and depth of experience they will need as senior leaders. This is a mistake.

In addition, the military must train and equip leaders with the capabilities to operate successfully in today's round the clock "real time" communications environment. Operational commanders and their staffs will either use today's technology successfully to degrade enemy operations or be its victim. The experience and breadth of capabilities of Grant's command staff enabled him to communicate effectively with national leaders, subordinates, and the media. Grant succeeded by including on his staff an experienced newspaperman named Charles Dana.

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<sup>61</sup> Archer Jones, *Civil War Command and Strategy: The Process of Victory and Defeat* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 229.

<sup>62</sup> *Lincoln and His Generals*, 313-314.

Dana's contacts in the media and his own expertise enabled Grant to shape the public opinion "battle space" by communicating Grant's army's capabilities and successes to the public and National government. This aided in the Union's overall determination to persevere during Grant's "bloody" battles in Virginia in 1864 and 1865.

### **Conclusion**

Although both Grant and McClellan had intellect, strong personality, professional knowledge, and experience, only Grant exhibited all of Vego's necessary traits of an operational leader. McClellan's meteoric rise to power enabled him to play a major role in the organization and training of the Army of the Potomac but did not afford him the time to develop his confidence as a combat commander before rising to the operational level of war. McClellan's failure to exhibit these traits and insubordination resulted in his default as an operational commander, loss of personal trust with Lincoln, and removal from command. Grant's steady progression through command levels enabled him to develop the skills, capabilities, and confidence to serve as an outstanding operational level commander, one willing to develop a support team and capability to communicate his objectives, and be responsive to national command authorities. Grant and Lincoln forged a relationship of personal trust that enabled them to weather the Civil War conflict and ultimately achieve Union victory.

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<sup>63</sup> *To the Gates of Richmond*, 10-11.

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